

Prof. I. Bernard Cohen
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Dr. Joshua Ledeb~~er~~g
Rockefeller University
New York City, NY

Dear Dr. Ledeb~~er~~g:

Our first contact, as I well remember, was when I was a graduate student (probably in my late twenties) when you sent me a letter (was it from Wisconsin?) asking about a source of a quotation.

Now, a half a century or so later, we "meet" again in the same way, with a request for a source of a quotation.

Over the years I have often received a query about this very quotation, usually attributed to Humboldt. I have on several occasions sought for it in vain. Some years ago, during a centenary celebration of Humboldt at the American Academy, the question arose of the source of this very quotation. Neither his biographer nor the German scholars present, who (supposedly) knew something about his writings, could give a source.

Of course, Humboldt could have written or said what you quote. I only report my failure ever to have found a source to prove it.

But I shall not utterly disappoint you.

First--I have written to Roy Porter (in London), who is currently compiling a dictionary of scientific quotes. He may have found it.

I have asked him to make direct contact with you since I know you have accumulated a great store of such quotations and perhaps would be willing to share some of them with the world at large.

Second--I do know of a source for a similar quotation, one that actually aroused some considerable notice in the eighteenth century. It led to a remark much like the one attributed to Humboldt, but one one occasion attributed to Lagrange or Laplace (I can't recall which). This source is my old "friend" Benjamin Franklin. I enclose a xerox of his complete statement. Humboldt certainly knew Franklin's writings, and perhaps made a paraphrase.

I hope we may meet some time during the coming year to talk about that phase of your work and its analysis (by yourself and by Harriet Zuckerman) that was the subject of our correspondence a few years ago. I hope to get on to that work during the coming months.

Regards

I. Bernard Cohen

Bernard

There are every where a number of people, who, being totally destitute of any inventive faculty themselves, do not readily conceive that others may possess it: They think of inventions as of miracles; there might be such formerly, but they are ceased. With these, every one who offers a new invention is deemed a pretender: He had it from some other country, or from some book: A man of *their own acquaintance*; one who has no more sense than themselves, could not possibly, in their opinion, have been the inventor of any thing. They are confirmed, too, in these sentiments, by the frequent instances of pretensions to invention, which vanity is daily producing. That vanity too, though an incitement to invention, is, at the same time, the pest of inventors. Jealousy and Envy deny the merit or the novelty of your invention; but Vanity, when the novelty and merit are established, claims it for its own. The smaller your invention is, the more mortification you receive in having the credit of it disputed with you by a rival, whom the jealousy and envy of others are ready to support against you, at least so far as to make the point doubtful. It is not in itself of importance enough for a dispute; no one would think your proofs and reasons worth their attention: And yet if you do not dispute the point, and demonstrate your right, you not only lose the credit of being in that instance *ingenious*, but you suffer the disgrace of not being *ingenious*; not only of being a plagiarist but of being a plagiarist for trifles.

Benjamin Franklin to Dr

John Linning

Phila. 18 March 1755